

Creator Q&A:
Harald Geisler of Typographical Calendar
by Mike McGregor, October 2010
(in Kickstarter Blog: http://bit.ly/q_and_a_cal)

When I first saw German designer Harald Geisler's 2011 Typography Calendar, I was immediately struck by how seemingly simple, yet utterly perplexing the calendar was. To be honest, it was unlike any calendar I'd ever seen before – massive, on one sheet of paper and made up solely of computer keys. I examined it thoroughly in a hi-res PDF, scanning each computer key, as if trying to decipher a bit of Cold War code. No luck. Dumbfounded, I had knew there was only one solution – to reach out to Harald Geisler myself, and get some answers.

The Typography Calendar, in many ways, forces the user to reconfigure how they visualize time. How did you first come up with the concept?

When I think back to the very beginning, I remember playing with the idea of a person typing (writing) – a person that sits in a random office in front of a computer and writes letters, for example, to customers. On every letter the person writes the date, a repetitive part of the job. I was imagining that as the person types, the pressed keys would (somehow) sum up or accumulate. Not only would the keys be counted but also they would be collected, ordered and stored. Over days and weeks it would become a mountain of keys.



The two topics that interest me (or show up) in this initial image or daydream are writing and notating. As a calligrapher and typographer of course writing is in the center of my interest. It is like water to swimming: essential. I am interested in writing as an outcome: in letterforms, calligraphy, digital fonts etc. That is the traditional craft of a typographer. But I am also interested in writing as a process. By that I mean the action of moving a tool, like a pen, to communicate, remember, or visualize something to someone or oneself. Although I don't work deliberately from concepts, my work always seems to be an investigation of the writing process.

As a designer I'm also interested in how notation forms and tools relate to content and use. I wrote my University thesis on this topic. Typical examples of notation forms are music scores, cooking recipes, and electrocardiogram. Language and writing are also examples. Notation is used to maintain information, but by maintaining, the information has to be modified to "fit in" the notation. Imagine how music would change if you used a different notation system. So there is an active relation between content and notation.

Writing stems from handwriting, but today most of my written communication is done with a computer and sent digitally. The keyboard is completely dispatched from handwriting, but it is essential to contemporary communication (think of email, twitter or facebook without a keyboard).

Calendars are notation forms or tools that enable organization of time. Antique calendars were lists – lists of religious events the holy days (or holidays). Contemporary calendars structure graphically and efficient time for different needs.

The image of the Typographic Wall Calendar is more like a list than a contemporary calendar – a linear list of all the days of the year. It is a string of characters, or keys, as if someone laid out the calendar key by key in a printing press. Or perhaps it's a magical collection of the keys that were used to type the calendar? Somehow the rearrangement of the keyboard always makes people ask questions. Before you know it's a calendar, you discover an image. Then you discover a code. At the moment when you realize that it's a calendar – when the shift in notation is realized – it becomes possible to talk about the notation itself.

On first view, the calendar is nearly impossible to read. Can you take us into the technical ways in which the Calendar is designed? How days, weeks, months are laid out? How to look at/read the calendar?

The calendars layout is simple. As described above I imagined a person working in an office typing every day of the year down like a text, every pressed key literally appears on the calendar. The keys are arranged in a grid. You read the composition just like a text: from left to right and top to bottom. The line breaks at the end of the canvas and the code continues on the left side again–like a monospaced typewriter. The entire text of the calendar fits on one big page, 70 x 100cm. Aply, there are 2011 keys in total!

Weeks and months are not isolated, but I did put in some special tricks to help you find the months. Every month's name is written out followed by a star (i.e. MARCH*). This is followed by the weekday name (March 2011 starts with TUE) and the number of the day (01). So March would look like: MARCH*TUE01WED02THUR03FRI04...THUR31. The month is followed by a larger backspace key that takes up twice the space. These bigger keys are visible from far away and offer an orientation to quickly find the end of the month.

Was there a point in the conceptualization where everything came together?

Most of my projects derive from many different ideas and interests. During the realization ideas, interests and plans come into vital conflict; until the process is done, everything stays in a moving state. The initial vision of the project makes the outcome predictable, but only to a certain extent. During the process aspects appear on levels that weren't foreseeable—at least not consciously.

For me conceptualization means putting things into an intellectual context – even defining the singular meaning or interpretation of the work.



Conceptualizing generally happens for me at the end of the process when I work to share something about what I have done in writing. What I like particular on the calendar project is that the concept remains open. I can, or the viewer can, reconceptualize the work over and over again.



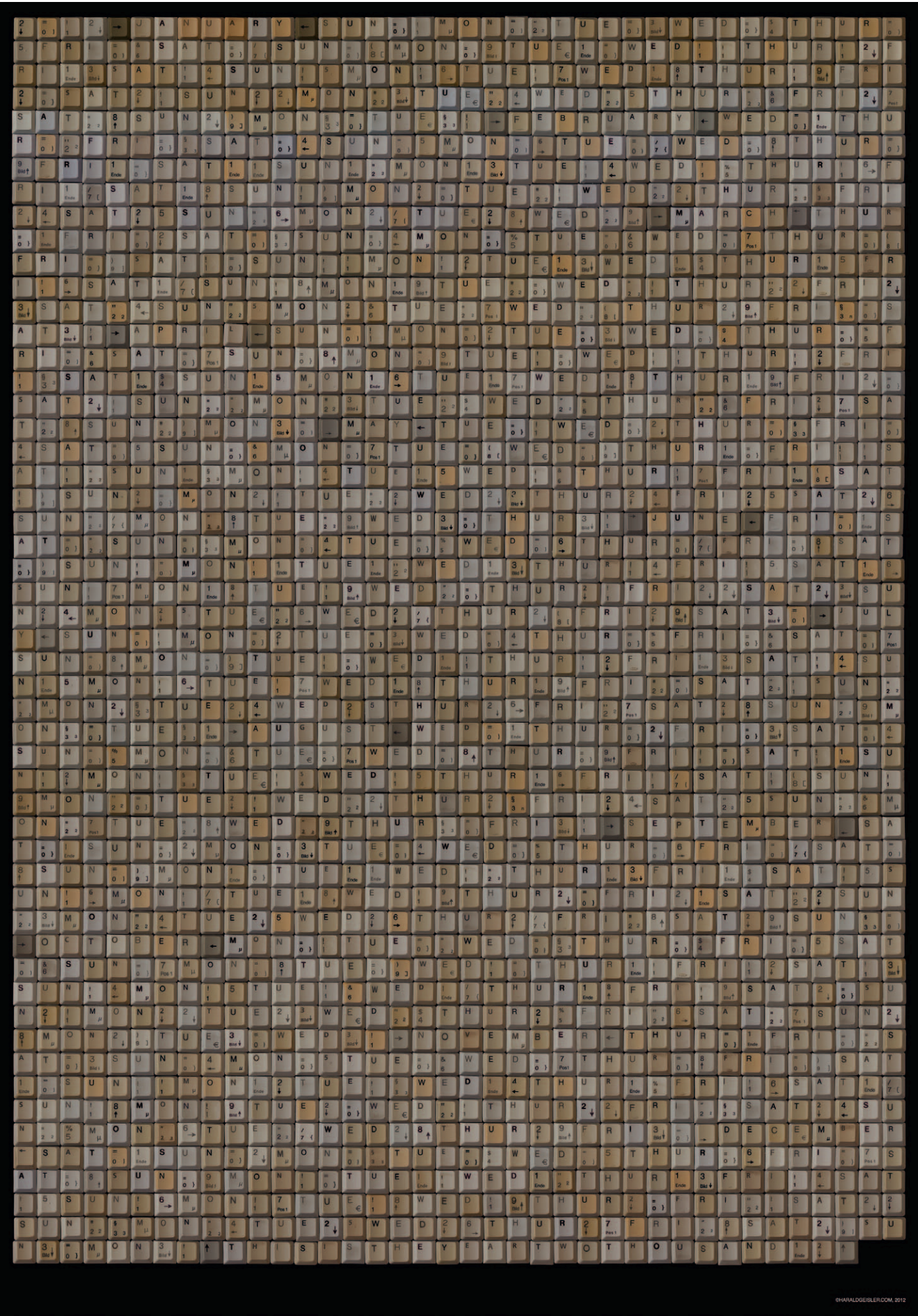
When I think of the Typographic Wall Calendar I rather refer to the term program than concept. In this case a program means that the execution of work (nor interpretation) is not tied to my person and what I believe it is. If program and concept are compared, the program carries less intention towards the interpretation; it just offers a base to place topics i.e. time, mass production, writing etc. in a "contextual canvas". I'm using the term program in reference to the work of Swiss designer Karl Gerstner. In 2007 I worked with Gerstner to republish "Designing Programmes," which was written initially in 1963. So to answer your question, in this case everything was together from the beginning – in the form of a program not a concept.

The program of the calendar is simple. It was the procedure of assembling or writing a calendar with keyboard keys. It was a way of working that's pretty transparent after you decode the calendar. So the viewer gets an almost complete insight into the process of the work. With this, the viewer is as potent as the creator to experience and interpret the work.

In terms of physically creating the project, what obstacles came up during production? Did you ever attempt to lay out the entire year at once? Would you ever consider making a poster literally out of keyboard keys?

I initially wanted to design a calendar to give away to my friends and clients. If I imagine the poster as a version made literally out of keyboard keys, which would be more of a sculpture, I certainly would have problems giving it away. And at the end of the year I would feel sorry that I didn't.

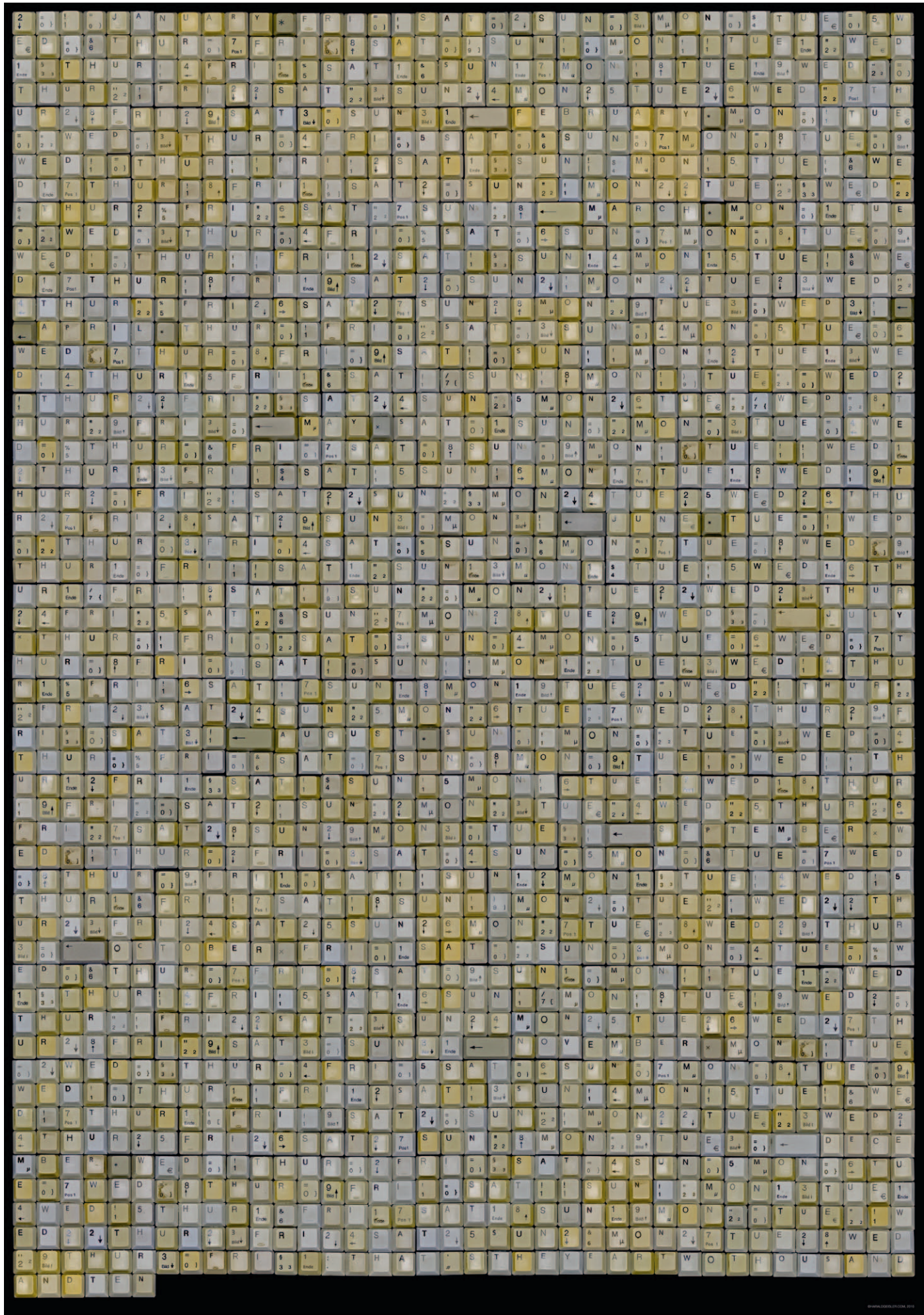
But I admit that I found that idea luring, so I did a little math. To make a full physical version I would need 350+ keyboards. In the preparation of the keys there is a part where I have to break the plastic connection attached to the backside of the key. This is necessary to position the key on a flat surface. With used keyboards, this operation can be challenging: in most cases the plastic is so old that it just breaks into pieces. After the first 100 keys I also found out that wearing gloves didn't protect me from getting blisters. Probably after a little time I would be able to process about 20 keys per hour. This would mean three minutes to get a key out of keyboard, break out the plastic and position it correctly while at the same time organizing the left over keyboards and tracking the remaining keys. Given that it would take 105 hours to compose the whole lay out. Maybe there is a Kickstarter 2011/2012 project in it? In other projects i.e. visual poems like the Sator square (picture above) I did use a full physical layout. These versions are meant as physical versions.



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- “...stunning reinterpretation of a calendar is a masterful example of how a designer can completely flip a genre signifier on its head. Geisler reimagines calendars in order to change the way we visualize time, and in turn, redefines what it means to save the date.”**
Michael McGregor, Kickstarter, NYC
<http://kickstarter.com>
- “The more I look at this poster, the more in awe of it I am...it's a complete revision of the way we construct time, month by month, day by day, To see a year laid out that way is somehow frightening and optimistic.”**
Elizabeth Kiefer, Editor at Fab.com, NYC
- “...one-of-a-kind...”**
Armin Vit, Quipsologies (former Speak Up) Vol.47 No.60, Austin TX
http://www.underconsideration.com/quipsologies/archives/november_2010/arminvit_60.php
- “...my heart went all a-flutter.”**
Blair Pfander, Writer at Sundance Channel / SUNfiltered, NY, Brooklyn
<http://www.sundancechannel.com/sunfiltered/2011/10/best-of-kickstarter-103>
- “...der minutiöse Wahnsinn, ... (der) eher an J. Johns oder einen sehr disziplinierten J. Pollock erinnert als an deinen normalen Wandkalender.”**
Hans Schumacher, slanted.de / projektgrafik.de, Berlin (Germany)
<http://www.slanted.de/eintrag/2011-typographic-wall-calendar-harald-geisler>
- “...simple, effective, straightforward, yet dizzying...”**
Xiaoli Li, Formatmag,
<http://www.formatmag.com/news/harald-geislars-keyboard-calendar/>
- “...einen präzisen, ungewöhnlichen Kalender.”**
Anna Weilberg, Page, Hamburg (Germany)
http://www.page-online.de/tema/typoartikel/typokalender_fuer_2012#anfang
- “Tipp”**
Jürgen Siebert, Font Shop CEO, Berlin (Germany)
<http://www.fontblog.de/typo-kalender-sammelt-15-000-bei-kickstarter>
- “...staggering image...”**
Erik Brandt, geotypografika.com, Minneapolis (US)
<http://geotypografika.com/2010/11/02/harald-geisler-typo-calendar/>
- “...thought intrigued...”**
Idealog Weekly, New Zealand
<http://idealog.co.nz/weekly/2010/11/surprise-success>
- “Creative of the week”**
Gerrie Smits, The RAAkonteur #20, London (UK)
<http://www.wewillraakyou.com/2010/12/the-raakonteur-20-social-funding-google-bates-buddies-why-people-share/>
- “...ambitiose...”**
Thomas Arendt, blog.makeyourmark.dk, Denmark
<http://blog.makeyourmark.dk/2010/11/25/2011-typographic-wall-calendar/>
- “...perfekte Tastenkombination für das kommende Jahr.”**
itspublique.de, Germany
<http://itspublique.de/archives/8457>
- “...amazing...”**
Andrew Dobrow, Geektoplasm
<http://geektoplasm.com/wall-calendar-made-out-of-old-keyboard-keys/>
- “...unique DIY...”**
Abby Jenkins, Apartment Tharapy Unplugged, US
<http://www.unplgd.com/unplgd/look/typographic-wall-calendar-made-from-old-keyboard-keys-131309>
- “...This is calendar ART. This is art that is a CALENDAR...”**
Clerkenunwell, Chicago (US)
<http://clerkenunwell.blogspot.com/2010/11/via-louisipotok.html>
- “Typographic Wall Calendar...ein völlig einzigartiges Projekt.”**
Carina Czisch, Berlin
<http://www.grafiker.de/kreativ-news/30112010/video-des-tages-2011-typographic-wall-calendar>
- Some tweets:
“Loved Harald Geisler's Typographic Wall Calendar...” Maria Popova | brainpickings.org | L.A. (US)
“...quite unusual...Not sure how practical it is though.” @smashingmag | smashingmagazine.com | Freiburg, Germany
“...pretty weird...” @smashingmag | smashingmagazine.com | Freiburg, Germany
“...meticulously...” @cassiekr | NYC
“...I love finding stuff like this. Especially on a Friday!...” @jamesbisch
“Labor of love.” @CreativeBacon
“Is it too early to start planning 2011? Not with this...” @overheardatmoo

Typographic Wall Calendar 2012, made of two thousand and twelve keys.



Typographic Wall Calendar 2010, made of two thousand and ten keys.

The **Typographic Wall Calendar** is about the act of notating time in order to organize it. While calendars nowadays are typically used to optimize personal potential by marking events and managing interaction with others, this calendar offers a view on the managing of time itself.

Past Forward

The ancient Egyptians oriented themselves in time by imagining the past before their eyes and the future behind their backs. In contemporary culture we tend to structure ourselves the other way around — looking towards the future ahead and the past behind. A calendar displays both the future and the past in front of us. It is a notation form that functions as a tool, an instrument for organizing, managing and imagining oneself in interaction with the world.

Early Western calendars were holiday calendars that marked holy days. They were not a vehicle for measuring time, but rather a medium for arranging religious actions. Religious calendars were used cyclically — read over and over again like a mantra. The development of the calendar from the notation of religious events to a premise for personal management reflects the changing position of individuals in Western society and their increasing self-awareness. Unlike religious calendars, personal calendars are linear. They enable referencing the personal past to design the personal future. Both systems can be used to locate the present. In both the future becomes past, but only in the religious calendar does the past become the future again.

Writing With Keys

The Typographic Keyboard Wall Calendar is an image and a written text at the same time. The picture contains 2010 keyboard keys. [The keys are arranged like text; treated like letters the arrangement of keys become a picture.]

Working typographically I treated the Gregorian calendar as a text and considered the writing of time by assembling the keys of this calendar dictation into a picture. My medium of keys emphasizes the treatment of writing in contemporary society, where a keyboard is the writing implement. [The calendar is marked with the keys that would be used to print or write it--showing the tool used to create text rather than the outcome of using the tool.]

The image of the keyboard key suggests the possibility of action. Keys are meant to be pressed. We press the button labeled “A” and an „a“ appears on the screen or paper. We hit the return key and a process in the machine starts - i.e. the carriage moves from the right to the left or a program is executed. The results of key actions, not the keys themselves, are meant to be read.

The design prompts a series of questions. First, what is it [the picture]? Is it just keys or is it something else? The different colors seem to follow a secret code that contains information. Once that information is recognized to be a calendar, the question becomes how to act with it. Does the usage of this calendar relate to how calendars or how keyboards are typically used? Do I have to press a series of keys to mark an event?

The picture becomes a movement instruction. An instruction that is imaging the reading of the writing of a normal calendar from beginning to end of a Year. It is no longer a list of “holy-days” but an instruction to re-create a written calendar.

Time Maps

A calendar is a special approach to time. A map structures space — makes it accessible to particular operations. A calendar works similarly. It divides time into pieces. It sets marks and generates distances. Calendars make time frameable,

measurable and tradable. It makes the future planable and predictable. How could a day be planed if it wasn’t divided into hours or daytimes?

The structure of calendar time is expressed by its geometrical structure. Duration is mapped to distance. Events expressed in area. I still remember how time was constructed for me in elementary school. Each semester we created a weekly plan. The grid moved one unit at a time, left to right, from Monday to Friday. The school hours (each 45 minutes) spanned one unit each from the top of the paper to the bottom. The week went by, left to right, and then started over again. It was a strange outcome — quadrants and intervals in a special map-like experience of the week.

Time is not modeled accurately by a calendar; each calendar transports a vision or a cultural attitude towards time. My elementary school calendar was designed according to tabular thinking. Historically tables were used to compare lists of information and to make calculations within lists. As such they were essential to the advent of trade--to organizing and running warehouses. In the table is the ghost of calculus.

All basic mathematical operations are connected to operations with tables of information. Tables were used to gain trading potentials. Better knowledge of warehouse inventory lead to more appropriate prices on the market. So the structure of the table refers to calculation, to the organization of goods, merchandise, or wares. By teaching children to use a table to organize time, they become part of a modern cultural heritage of treating time like commodity.

There are many subtleties in the geometrical visualization of time — in time design. When twelve o’clock Monday is put next to twelve o’clock Tuesday it creates a visual relation which does not exist temporally.

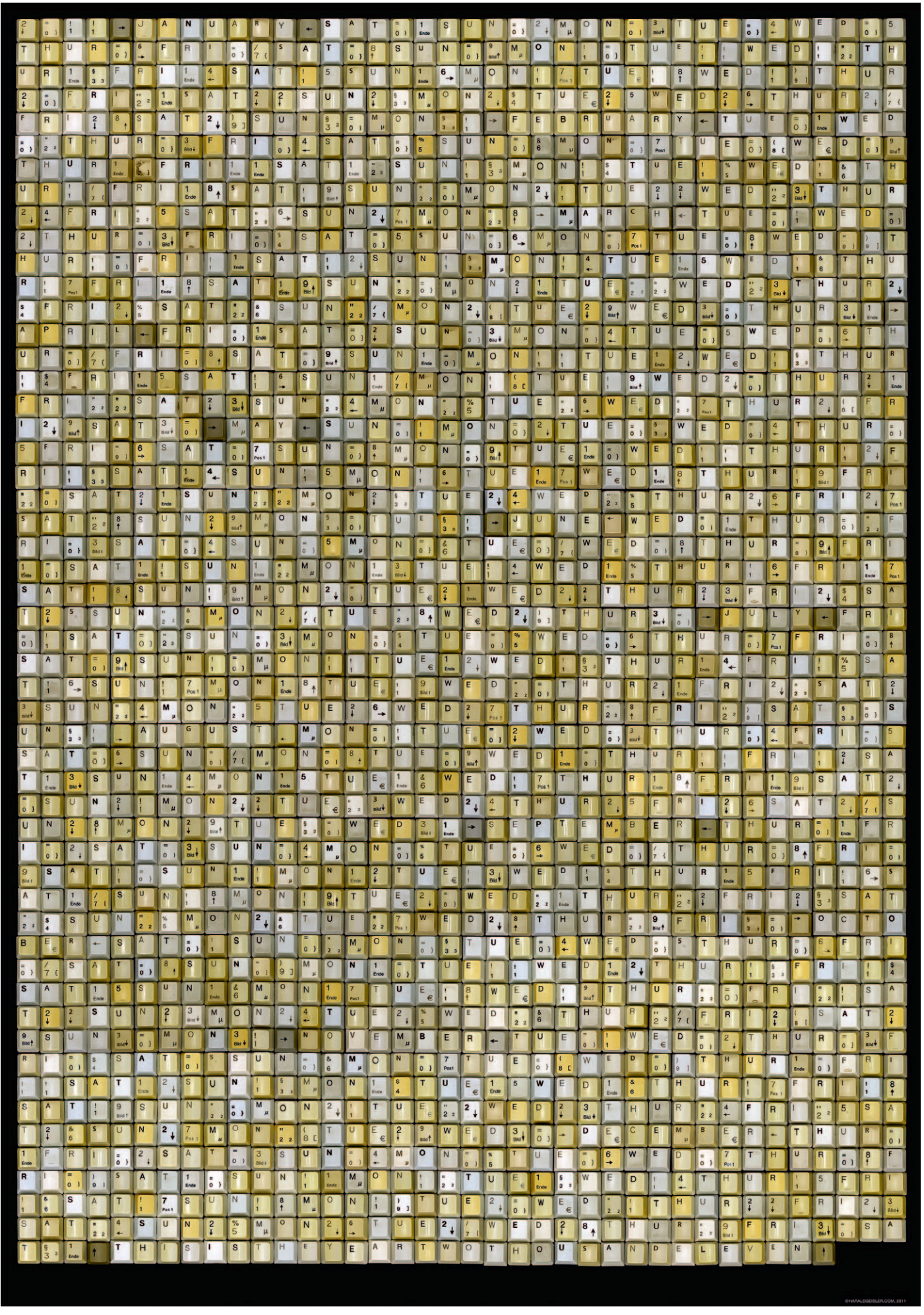
In most common calendars Saturday and Sunday are put together as one unit (i.e. on one page or section size of one business day). Why is that done? Because these days are commonly without value for trading related actions or are not processable within a trade-related structure or system (i.e. family, religion, social relations, shopping for food). But if time becomes, through structure (in this case a calendar) a tradable merchandise or good, is that not contradictory to how time is experienced? Time is perceivable only in the present. Plans and prediction of future that might come real in the present, but they are not part of presence. Also there is no past that becomes present — just memories and recordings of the past that are remembered in the present but not relived. Whether we plan ahead or remember the past it relates to our direct and immediate being.

A calendar helps us to orient in time by remembering the past, planning the future and to put both in a context to locate the presence. The process of orientation is, for some people, an act of imagination with the past behind you and the future in front of you. The Typographic Wall Calendar similarly requires orientation in a flow. The calendar happens only when you see yourself in front the calendar. The view of putting keyboard keys next to each other is an instruction to do a movement in the operation of writing in which you mark or process time.

APPENDIX: Technical details

The size of the print is B0 70cm x 100cm (27.56“ x 39.37“).

The printing is done with a standard 4c offset printing machine on glossy paper, finished with a UV coating to protect the colors from bleaching. The UV coating also provides protection against water and dust.



Typographic Wall Calendar 2011, made of two thousand and eleven keys.